

# Brown

George Albert Brown had never heard of "post-traumatic stress disorder" in the 1940s when he sometimes woke up screaming from nightmares that were all too real.

In those instances, the Henderson native had in his sleep relived the early morning hours of Dec. 7, 1941, when he was a young ship's cook third class in the belly of the USS Oklahoma.

On the day that changed the course of history for the world and the "little country boy," some 360 Japanese planes swooped in on Pearl Harbor from three directions and within moments transformed battleships into smoking coffins and claimed the lives of 2,400 Americans. Another 1,300 were wounded, and the oil-covered ocean burned.

Kaleidoscopic images of the sinking and crippled ships and sailors who couldn't swim and a plump cook who couldn't fit through a jammed hatch have remained vivid in his mind for the 60 years since, but he never talked about them until recent weeks.

Why now?

An Associated Press reporter asked him that question and Brown, now 80, replied, "I wanted to get something on paper for my grandchildren." As Brown told me last week in a telephone interview from his Aiea, Hawaii, home, "Freedom isn't free.

You gotta fight for it."

To his surprise, he finds himself something of a celebrity in this, the winter of his life. In the last month, he has been quoted in AP stories, had his photograph appear beside that of

movie stars in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, appeared on television and been escorted down an 850-foot-long red carpet aboard the gargantuan nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis.

Just as Japanese bombs plunged him into unimaginable dangers on that long-ago morning, the \$135 mil-



George Brown, left, in a recent photo at age 80, and right, as a Navy recruiter. (Photos furnished)

lion movie that recreates the "day that shall live in infamy" plunged him into the spotlight.

That three-hour Disney film, "Pearl Harbor," premiered May 21 aboard the USS John C. Stennis and it was apparently hard to tell who were the real celebrities on that occasion — the stars of the film or the 120 Pearl Harbor survivors, including Brown.

At the conclusion of the movie that was seen by 2,000 guests aboard the ship, the four-story tall screen was raised to reveal the aged survivors who had gotten out of the Pearl Harbor inferno, as Brown says, "by the grace of God."

The World War II slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor" is one that has colored virtually all of his days since that time. There is no way he could forget the epic event because he and his wife Alice — who was raised in Hawaii — live on the side of a mountain that overlooks Pearl Harbor. They built their house there in 1950, though they lived in Henderson from 1957-61 when he was in charge of Navy recruiting for the Owensboro area.

On Memorial Day this year, he went to a service at the USS Arizona memorial and, "Would you believe it?" he asks, "F.D.R.'s grandson H. Delano Roosevelt was the speaker."

Brown lost "a lot of good friends" on that other famed ship, the USS Oklahoma, during the attack that found the Pacific fleet, as he puts it, "the most unprepared crew you could ever expect."

He is aware of how ironic it is that the commander of the fleet, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, was another Henderson native. Brown, who grew up in the Audubon section of town, often passed by the Kimmel family's big white home that stood on the northeast corner of Fifth and Green Streets.

He says the blame for the lack of preparation has to be placed on both Washington D.C. and Kimmel (and his Army counterpart Walter Short).

George had been at Pearl Harbor a year and a half when the bombs rained down. Also aboard the Oklahoma was his good friend Jimmy Collins, with whom he had gone through basic training and other locations prior to the Pacific assignment. Collins, who was from a small community near Hopkinsville, died in a section of the ship that took a direct hit.

Years later, when Brown was asked to speak at a Memorial Day program in Hopkinsville, he went to visit Collins' parents. He had never met them, and didn't expect them to know him. Collins' father immediately took him into the living room, where a photograph of Jimmy Collins and Brown had place of honor on the mantel.

That Brown survived Pearl Harbor is a testament to the cook who helped him through a jammed hatch, and the fact that George was a small fellow — only 5-feet, 4-inches tall and 120 pounds.

At least a dozen of his crew perished because they couldn't fit through the hydraulically-controlled hatch, which was open about 2 inches and couldn't be budged. In all, Brown says, 429 died on the Oklahoma, which capsized within 10 minutes of the start of the bombing.

He managed to escape, and swam about halfway across the oil-covered bay before he was picked up by a boat. Neither turpentine nor anything else that was used would immediately remove the oil that covered his face and body. He was taken to a site where he was hastily given clothes and footwear, and "had one shoe that was one size and one shoe that was another size."

He was issued a rifle and ammunition and housed in a building where he slept on the concrete floor for two nights before being transferred to "The Warden" destroyer "that started dropping depth charges as soon as we cleared the harbor."

Brown went all through the South Pacific on that ship, and was in both the Coral Sea and Midway battles.

That was not to be his last war. The career Navy man also served in the Korean War, "and made two trips to Korea on destroyers." One of them was "shot up, and had holes you could stick your hand through."

The father of three, grandfather of 10 and great-grandfather of eight still has Henderson connections, including his baby sister, Martha Campbell, who lives here.

He was the middle of five children born to George Francis Brown and Alma Brown. His dad worked at Delker Brothers Furniture and his mom took in laundry. "I used to have to deliver the laundry in a wagon," he chuckled.

Told that the movie "Pearl Harbor" was playing here, Brown said he hopes a lot of people see it because he believes it is an education in itself. He told an Associated Press reporter, "The young people don't know what we go through to secure their freedom."